DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 330 209 FL 019 110

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TITLE Spelling Reform--An Old Idea Revisited.
PUB DATE 5 Mar 91
NOTE 13p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Change Strategies; Diachronic Linguistics; Elementary Secondary Education; *English; *Illiteracy; *Language Patterns; *Language Planning; Linguistic Borrowing; Phoneme Grapheme Correspondence; *Spelling

ABSTRACT

One cause for illiteracy that is often overlooked is the difficulty of learning the English orthographic system, which is less consistent than that of many other languages. Several historical and linguistic factors have contributed to this inconsistency, including: the "freezing" of the rapidly changing spelling system in the early years of printing; the large number of borrowed words; and misguided scholarship in medieval times. Periodic attempts to reform English spelling have met with derision and little success. Benjamin Franklin and Noah Webster in the 18th century and the American Philological Society, Spelling Reform Association, and Simplified Spelling Board in the 19th and early 20th centuries have made only slight progress in simplifying English spelling. Arguments against spelling reform include the proposals that an isomorphic spelling system cannot handle all the phonemic variations arising between dialects, that many homophones would not longer be differentiated in print, and that isomorphic orthography would obscure the semantic connection between related words. However, each of these has a counterargument. The perennial issue facing reformers is how far to take reform. A feasible reform plan would have to meet the criteria of economy, least disruption, and acceptance. It may be time to undertake this change. (MSE)

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SPELLING REFORM - AN OLD IDEA REVISITED

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March 5, 1991

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SPELLING REFORM -- AN OLD IDEA REVISITED

*Approximate 45% of students entering certain junior high schools in Baltimore, New York, and Washington will not graduate six years hence.

*By HEW estimates over 27 million adults in America are functionally illiterate, unable to read even a street sign or a product label. In addition, more than a million of our school children age 12 to 17 cannot read above the third grade level. (U.S. News 1985, pp. 54-57)

*The U.S. Department of Labor estimates that the cost of illiteracy now exceeds six billion dollars annually, and one study has shown that illiterates may comprise three-fourths of the unemployed. (U.S. News 1985, pp. 54-57)

We all have heard such statements before, and the American public is no longer aghast at such statistics. But as a popular bumper sticker reads, "If you think education is expensive, try ignorance."

Part of the difficulty -- the high drop-out rates -- can be attributed to the fact that many students have never mastered the skills of reading. Frustrated by their inability to cope with their studies, these young people simply leave school.

There are no doubt many causes for illiteracy, but one cause often overlooked may be found in the orthographic system in English. Unlike the isomorphic orthographies of Italian, Finnish, and German -- where there is usually one sound for

one letter -- the spelling system of English is not quite as consistent. For example, the vowel /i/ may be spelled in twelve different ways: be, bee, thief, mete, receive, people, leave, amoeba, machine, key, quay, and Caesar (Hall 1961, p. 30). The situation is equally confusing with consonants. As Baugh points out, there are fourteen spellings for the phoneme /ʃ/: shoe, sugar, issue, mansion, mission, nation, suspicion, ocean, nauseous, conscious, chaperone, schism, fuchsia, and pshaw (1957, p. 13). And to add even more confusion, letters in English do not have consistent sound values. For example, the letter a is pronounced differently in each of the following words: fat, father, bather, water, hand, and sofa.

Several historical and/or linguistic factors have contributed to the seeming chaos in the English spelling system, and foremost among these was the effect of the printing press. When the use of movable type was introduced to English in the mid fifteenth century, English pronunciation was changing rapidly. However, over the next two centuries the use of the printing press gradually "froze" spelling, with the end result being that modern spelling often reflects an older, obsolete pronunciation. Take, for example, the word knight. Related to the modern German word knicht (apprentice), the word was originally pronounced [knixt]. The [k] was dropped as was the aspirate [x]. ([x] resembles the final sound in German ich.) When [x] was dropped, the vowel was dipthongized to [ai], giving the modern pronunciation.

Another factor contributing to the inconsistencies of the English spelling system lies in the large number of words that have been borrowed in the language. Many of these words have simply retained their foreign spellings. Thus we have borrowings like milieu, hors d'oeuvre and choir, which have added to the confusion.

A third factor can simply be attributed to misguided scholarship. Because of the errant transcribing practices of certain medieval scribes, English, orthography is now burdened with the c and final e in such words as come, none, and love. In addition, many other unusual spellings can also be laid at the feet of benighted scholars. Certain fifteenth century scholars, wanting to make English words reflect their Greek and Latin origin, began to insert "silent" letters in these words, regardless of their previous spellings. As a result, they influenced the spellings of many common words. To such scholars we are indebted to the b in debt (from Latin debitum), the p in receipt (from Latin receptus), and the s in island (from Latin insula).

Attempts have been made periodically to reform or simplify English spelling but such attempts have often met with much derision and with little success. One of the first Americans to call for consistency in letter and sound was Benjamin Franklin, who in 1768 published "A Scheme for a New Alphabet and Reformed Mode of Spelling." Too old to pursue the plan, Franklin passed on the mantle to Noah Webster, who though

influenced by Franklin, would eventually take a milder tack. Rather than reforming the spelling system, Webster attempted to simplify the spelling of various words. Some of the simplifications attributed to him include the -or (rather than -our) in words like honor, neighbor, labor, and the -er (rather than -re) in words like meager, theater, center.

In the mid nineteenth century an English reformer, Isaac Pitman, promulgated phonotypy, an alphabet of forty letters. Pittman's attempt at reform was precursor for other calls for reform. In 1875 the American Philological Society appointed a commission to study the matter and in 1877 it promulgated a 38 letter isomorphic alphabet. From the research, interest, and fervor fomented by both the American and the British philological societies sprang two organizations, the Spelling Reform Association and the Simplified Spelling Board.

These two organizations, though having the same ends in mind, espoused somewhat different means. The Spelling Reform Association, promoting a new isomorphic spelling system, advocated the use of a 48-phoneme alphabet called the Revised Scientific Alphabet (Dewey 1970, p. 12). Financed by Andrew Carnegie until his death in 1919, the Association became an effective lobbying group. The Simplified Spelling Board took a more moderate position. Although it did devise and promote the Fonetic Key Alfabet, the board sought the widest possible adoption of a limited number of new spellings. Supported by the National Education Association, the Simplified Spelling Board attempted to promote the simplified spelling of 300

words, many of them the irregularly spelled words known as "sight" words to elementary teachers (Baugh 1957, p. 389).

My purpose in mentioning names like Franklin, Webster, and Carnegie is to show that the cause of spelling reform was championed by reasonable, educated individuals and that spelling reform was not the work of a few misguided cranks. However, the cause of spelling reform has generally been met with opposition and scorn in the media. Take the case of Theodore Roosevelt. In 1906 the Simplified Spelling Board published its list of 300 simplified spellings (e.g. tho instead of though, thru instead of through, judgement instead of judgment, etc.) President Roosevelt, favoring the Board plan, ordered the Public Printer to use the simplified spellings in all government documents. Reacting unfavorably, Congress threatened to withhold appropriations to the Public Printer if the Presidential order were not rescinded. Roosevelt was forced to back down, and the newspapers had a field day ridiculing the spelling reform movement. In March, 1909, on the day of President Taft's inauguration, one writer for the New York Sun wrote a singularly terse editorial about the former President. Just one word, it read, "Thru" (Robertson and Cassady 1954, p. 360).

Several arguments inveigh against a spelling reform. One of these deals with dialects. It is argued that an isomorphic spelling system cannot handle all the phonemic variations that arise between dialects. For example, the word water is likely to be pronounced /wɔ tər/ by Easterners and /wɑ tə r/ by Midwesterners. However, any dialect has internal

consistencies, and any new spelling system would likely present no more problems in this regard than the present system. For example, the "inny-minny-pinny" speakers of Louisiana and East Texas would have no more trouble pronouncing the words spelled "eny" or "meny" than they would with the present any or many.

A second objection to spelling reform involves homophones. Many homophones would no longer be differentiated on the printed page; the distinctions between son and sun, bear and bare, and complement and compliment would be lost. However, it must be remembered that such distinctions are distinctions to the eye only, and in speech one can easily distinguish the members of the pair through context. In addition, an isomorphic spelling would provide visual differentiation to homographs. With an isomorphic spelling system words like bow (the front end of a boat and a knot) and wind (a breeze and the present tense of the verb wound) would be spelled differently.

A final objection to an isomorphic spelling system is that such an orthography would obscure the semantic connection between related words. It has been argued that conventional spelling is an "optimal system" because in part it reveals the predictable variations of the same morphemes (Halle and Chomsky 1968, p. 49). Compare, for example, conspire and conspiracy, zeal and zealous, history and historical. It is also argued that it is a practical convenience that semantically related words should look alike and should be

recorded together in the dictionary. However, the semantic relations between words would still obtain even with a reformed spelling system.

After all, they still do in speech. Moreover, conventional orthography is too high a price to pay for this morphemic convenience.

It has been estimated that students spend two and one-half years learning to read and that elementary teachers spend about seventy percent of their time teaching language arts. The adoption of a simplified spelling system would facilitate such teaching. Children would learn to read faster as they do in Italy or with synthetic alphabets like ita (Downing 1967). In addition, the adoption of such a spelling system would be cost effective. If the time students were taught to read were decreased by 20 percent, the savings would be in terms of billions annually.

The perennial question that has faced spelling reformers has been, how far do you go? Do you change the spellings of individual words or do you change the orthographic system as a whole?

Those who have taken the milder tack have generally espoused three principles in changing the spellings of various words:

1. adopt the shortest and simplest spelling when correct usage offers a choice: catalog for catalogue, tho for though, quartet for quartette.
2. omit silent letters wherever practicable: hay for have, liv for live, definit for definite, anser for answer

3. follow the simpler rather than the more complex existing analogy: buro rather than bureau, enuf rather than enough, nite rather than night (Handbook of Simplified Spelling, pp. 18-19).

Others scoffing at such mild reforms advocate adopting an ismorphic spelling system. But if such a system were to have any chance of being adopted, it is reasonable that it would first have to meet these criteria:

1. Economy. No new letters of symbols would be added. Diacritical marks like umlauts or macrons would not be used with letters. All letters would be retained, and the new orthographic system would remain compatible with the present QWERTY typewriter and terminal keyboard.

2. Least disruption. The goal of a reformed spelling system would be to establish an isomorphic orthography but one that would not needlessly depart from conventional spelling. For example, among the dozen different ways to represent the vowel sound of each, the most common form in single syllable words seems to be ee, and that spelling would seem to be the least disruptive.

3. Acceptance. So as not to engender any more resistance than is necessary, there would be no call for changes in the spellings of proper nouns. In addition, changes would be introduced over an extended period of time, with

the least controversial changes, usually introduced first. However, with each change, the spelling system would have to retain internal consistency. For example, if the silent letter b were eliminated from the word climb, there would also have to be a means for showing that the vowel in this word had retained its long sound.

Regardless of whether the spelling reforms were mild or drastic, millions of us who have learned to read still have a vested interest in using the conventional spelling system. And we are not likely to listen to children or to foreigners who are learning to cope with the vagaries of English orthography.

But spelling reform is not unthinkable. The Turks have done it. The Chinese are doing it. The Dutch do it about every forty years (Bollinger and Seers 1981, p. 285). And perhaps it is time that we too do it.

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